Honest Leadership and Open Government

To ensure this Congress upholds the highest ethical standards, the ethics package begins to sever the connection between lobbyists and legislation, by banning gifts and travel from lobbyists, and ending the abuses connected to privately-funded congressional travel (including corporate jets). The rules package restores democracy in the House – committing to a fair and open process for amendments and an end to 2-day work weeks; curbing abuses of voting, guaranteeing time to read legislation, and opening up Conference Committees so that the minority is able to participate

Facts:

The cozy relationship between Congress and special interests has resulted in lobbying scandals, such as those involving super lobbyist Jack Abramoff. In this scandal, former Rep. Bob Ney pleaded guilty to conspiring to commit fraud -- accepting all-expense-paid trips to play golf in Scotland and accepting meals, sports and concert tickets, while providing legislative favors for Abramoff's clients.

Republicans permitted a Congress in which lobbyists write the bills, 15-minute votes are held open for three hours, and entirely new legislation is crammed into signed conference reports in the dead of night.

Reform of the culture of corruption is a top priority of the American people and a top priority of House Democrats. 74 percent of voters cited corruption as an extremely important or a very important issue in their choice at the polls.

Fiscal Responsibility

This package requires pay-as-you-go budget discipline with no new deficit spending, and requires full transparency as well as end the abuse of special interest earmarks. The House rules package will not allow consideration of any bill, amendment or conference report where the mandatory spending (such as Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and farm bill) or revenue provisions increases the deficit over the five-year and ten-year windows. We also plan to pursue pay-as-you-go legislation in order to protect our grandchildren from mountains of debt and spur economic growth.

Facts:

The Bush Administration has turned projected 10-year $5.6 billion surplus into a nearly $3 trillion deficit.

America's debt has already climbed 50 percent to more than $28,000 per person, and President Bush has borrowed more from foreign nations than previous 42 U.S. presidents combined. [House Budget Committee, 9/27/06]

Rising interest rates caused by Bush deficits cost middle-class families as much as $1,700 a year on credit card and mortgage payments. [Third Way, 8/28/06]

Pay-as-you-go was the law of the land from 1990 until 2002, paving the way for a balanced budget in the 1990s, four years of budget surpluses, and bringing down the debt by $453 billion.

Implementing 9/11 Commission's Recommendations

This legislation provides for the implementation of the 9/11 Commission's recommendations remaining after the enactment of the Intelligence Reform bill in 2004. The bill's provisions include requiring major improvements in aviation security, border security, and infrastructure security; providing first responders the equipment and training they need; beefing up efforts to prevent terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction; and significantly expanding diplomatic, economic, educational, and other strategies designed to counter Islamic terrorism.

Facts:

In 2004, the 9/11 Commission submitted 41 recommendations to the Administration and Congress on improving homeland security, preventing terrorists from acquiring WMD, and developing strategies for preventing the spread of Islamic terrorism. Many have only been partially implemented and others not at all.

In December 2005, in its final report card, the 9/11 Commissioners gave the Administration and Congress many poor grades on implementing the recommendations, including 5 F's, 12 D's, 9 C's, and 2 Incompletes. A few months ago, they stated that the grades had not improved in 2006. For example, these grades include:

- A "F" grade on providing a risk-based allocation of homeland security funding
- A "F" grade on ensuring communications interoperability for first responders
- A "D" grade on the screening of checked baggage and air cargo on passenger aircraft
- A "D" grade on government information sharing
- A "D" grade on preventing the proliferation of WMD and terrorism

Implementing the 9/11 Commission's recommendations is supported by 62 percent of Americans. [Gallup/USA Today poll, 10/06] It is also supported by several bipartisan and nonpartisan groups, including such groups representing 9/11 families as the Voices of September 11th and Families of September 11.

Raising the Minimum Wage

This bill increases the minimum wage from $5.15 to $7.25 an hour over two years. Increasing the minimum wage to $7.25 per hour would bring a pay raise for up to 13 million Americans.

Facts:

Raising the minimum wage would provide an additional $4,400/year for a family of three, equaling 15 months of groceries, or over two years of health care - helping them to keep up with rising costs.

Nearly 13 million people would likely benefit from the increase - 5.6 million directly and 7.4 million indirectly. This includes 7.7 million women, 3.4 million parents, and 4.7 million people of color.

It is wrong to have millions of Americans working full-time and year-round and still living in poverty. At $5.15 an hour, a full-time minimum wage worker brings home $10,712 a year -nearly $6,000 below the poverty level for a family of three.

A minimum wage increase is particularly important at a time when America's families have seen their real income drop by almost $1,300 since 2000, while the costs of health insurance, gasoline, home heating, and attending college have increased by almost $5,000 annually. [Government Reform, 9/21/06]

The minimum wage has not increased in more than nine years - the longest period in the history of the law. During that time, Members of Congress have received a $31,600 pay raise. The real value of the minimum wage has plummeted to its lowest level in 51 years. [Economic Policy Institute, 6/06]

An average CEO earns more before lunchtime in one day than a minimum wage worker earns all year. [EPI, 6/2706]

Promoting Life-Saving Stem Cell Research

The DeGette-Castle stem cell research bill increases the number of lines of stem cells that are eligible to be used in federally-funded research. The bill authorizes Health and Human Services (HHS) to support research involving embryonic stem cells meeting certain criteria, regardless of the date on which the stem cells were derived from an embryo. Current policy allows federal funds to be used for research only on those stem cell lines that existed when President Bush issued an executive order on August 9, 2001. The bill only authorizes the use of stem cell lines generated from embryos that would otherwise be discarded by fertility clinics. The bill includes stronger ethical guidelines than the President’s current policy.

Facts:

The bill only authorizes the use of stem cell lines generated from embryos that would otherwise be discarded by fertility clinics. The bill has strict ethical guidelines, including stipulating that embryos can be used only if the donors give their written consent and receive no money or other inducement in exchange for the embryos.

Embryonic stem cell research has the potential to unlock the doors to treatments and cures to numerous diseases, including diabetes, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, ALS, multiple sclerosis, and cancer.

Expanding embryonic stem cell research is supported by 72 percent of Americans. [Opinion Research Corporation]

Embryonic stem cell research is supported by more than 200 organizations, including the American Medical Association, AARP, Association of American Medical Colleges, Parkinson's Action Network, American Diabetes Association, Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, and Paralyzed Veterans of America.

Few of the stem cell lines authorized by President Bush in 2001 are now useful for research. According to the National Institutes of Health, of the 78 stem cell lines that were declared eligible for federal funding in the President's executive order of August 2001, only about 22 lines are now still available for researchers. And many of these 22 "available" stem cell lines are contaminated with "mouse feeder" cells, making their therapeutic use for humans uncertain.

Cutting Interest Rates on Student Loans

This bill makes college more accessible and affordable by cutting the interest rates on subsidized student loans in half – from the current 6.8 percent to 3.4 percent. This significantly cuts the student debt burden of about 5 million students.

Facts:

Cutting student loan interest rates is supported by 88 percent of the American public - with a majority of Republicans, Independents, and Democrats all in support. [Newsweek poll, 11/06]

The costs of attending college continue to skyrocket - putting college out-of-reach for more and more students. Tuition and fees at public universities have increased by 41 percent after inflation since the 2000-2001 school year and tuition and fees at private universities have jumped by 17 percent after inflation.

In addition to tuition and fees rising, interest rates on student loans have risen. Over the last five years, the interest rates on student loans have jumped by almost 2 percentage points - further increasing the cost of college. More and more students are staggering under the load of student debt - with the typical student borrower now graduating from college with $17,500 in debt.

According to studies from the Department of Education, financial barriers will prevent 4.4 million high school graduates from attending a four-year public college over the next decade, and prevent another two million high school graduates from attending any college at all.

More than ever, the health of our economy rests on having a highly-skilled and well-educated workforce. College access is the key to our remaining strong in the face of an increasingly competitive global economy. Without changes, by the year 2020, the United States is projected to face a shortage of up to 12 million college-educated workers, directly threatening America's economic strength.

Requiring Medicare to Negotiate Lower Prescription Drug Prices

This bill repeals the current provision that prohibit the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) from negotiating with drug companies for lower prices for those enrolled in Medicare prescription drug plans and instead requires the Secretary to conduct such negotiations. The bill also requires the HHS Secretary to submit to the relevant congressional committees a report on the negotiations conducted by the Secretary, not later than June 1, 2007, and every six months thereafter. Under the bill, the Secretary has discretion on how to best implement the negotiating authority and achieve the greatest discounts.

Facts:

This bill provides the HHS Secretary complete discretion in how to implement his negotiating authority. The Secretary's options are many and HHS has a wealth of expertise, which it successfully used in 2001 to obtain lower prices for Cipro, the prescription drug used in response to the anthrax attacks.

Giving HHS negotiating authority is supported by 92 percent of Americans. [Newsweek poll, 11/06] It is also supported by many organizations, including the AARP, Consumers Union, and the AFL-CIO.

The current Medicare Rx drug law has failed to slow the rapid growth in drug prices; the prices charged by Medicare drug plans are rising at more than twice the rate of overall inflation. A Families USA study shows that, over a 6-month period, the median drug price increase among Medicare drug plans for the top 20 drugs prescribed for seniors was 3.7 percent - which translates into a 7.4 percent increase over a year, more than twice the rate of overall inflation. As the study concludes, "The Medicare drug plans are not containing drug price inflation."

The Medicare Rx drug program has resulted in a windfall for big drug companies - with drug companies now reporting record profits and seniors paying higher drug prices. In October, Pfizer, the world's biggest drug company, reported that its third-quarter earnings had more than doubled from a year earlier. Similarly, Eli Lilly, Novartis and Wyeth also reported significantly higher profits.

Repealing Big Oil Subsidies/Investing in Renewable Fuels

This bill invests in clean, renewable energy and energy efficiency by repealing billions in subsidies given to big oil companies that are raking in record profits. Specifically, the measure ensures oil companies that were awarded the 1998 and 1999 leases for drilling paid their fair share in royalties. It also closes loopholes and ends giveaways in the tax code for Big Oil. Finally, the bill creates a Strategic Renewable Energy Reserve to invest in clean, renewable energy resources, promoting new emerging technologies, developing greater efficiency and improving energy conservation.

Facts:

Over the last several years, profits and subsidies for Big Oil have climbed, as has our dependence on foreign oil. In 2006, the big five oil companies made $97 billion - nearly five times their profits in 2002. Gas prices at the pump also topped $3 per gallon.

The U.S. now has a record dependence on foreign oil, which has climbed to 65 percent.

The U.S. is sending about $800 million per day to the Middle East and other oil producing countries.

Reducing our dependence on foreign oil is critical to bolstering our national security and creating good-paying new jobs. American farms abound with crops that can be used to fuel our cars and trucks - from corn to soybeans to switchgrass. In 2005, the ethanol industry supported the creation of more than 150,000 jobs in all sectors of the U.S. economy, boosting U.S. household income by $5.7 billion. [Report for the Renewable Fuels Association]

The President's budget funds renewable energy and energy efficiency at below the 2001 level, in real terms, and provides nearly 50 percent less for research on renewable energy than was promised in the energy law.

There is broad bipartisan support for ending the addiction to oil by investing in clean renewable fuels. 52% of the American public said the U.S. government should invest in alternative energy sources to reduce dependence on foreign oil. [LAT/Bloomberg poll, 8/3/06]